**Echo and Narcissus**

**Audio file**

Duration: 7 min 37 sec.

**Summary**

A woman gives birth to a beautiful boy, called Narcissus, and is told by the prophet, Teiresias, that he will have a long life unless he learns to know himself. Meanwhile Echo, a talkative wood nymph, falls foul of the goddess Hera. The chatterbox is punished and left only able to repeat the last words of others.

One day Echo sees Narcissus by chance and falls desperately in love with him. He, however, makes it clear that her love that will never be reciprocated. Constantly pining for him Echo wastes away until all that remains of her is her voice.

Beautiful Narcissus, so loved and yet unloving, sees no one worthy of his love until he catches sight of an exquisite being in a pool of water as he bends down to take a drink. Filled with longing for the figure, he tries in vain to reach the person in the water. Eventually he recognises it is himself and just as Echo suffered so does he: he too wastes away and his body is transformed into a delicate flower leaning over the edge of a pool.

Suggested teaching time: 1 hour.

**Key themes**

Pride

Vanity

Love

Beauty

**Teachers’ notes**

One of the roles of the stories in classical mythology was to explain natural phenomena. The story of Echo and Narcissus provides us with an explanation for the way sound can echo and at the same time suggests the origins of the narcissus flower. But it also acts as a warning about the dangers of becoming obsessed with someone else – or with oneself! So one question one could pursue before listening to the story is, ‘Is it possible to love someone too much?’

**Follow- up activities**

Study the two main characters identifying characteristics and forming opinions on their actions and the fate that befalls them. In what way are Echo and Narcissus similar to each other and in what ways different?

Have you ever wanted something you could not have? How did it feel?

*Echo*

* How was Echo punished? Who punished her? Why?
* We learn in other versions that she loved to spread gossip, slander and rumours often encouraging the other nymphs to behave badly. Did she deserve her punishment?
* Echo claims she is in love with Narcissus. What causes Echo to fall in love with Narcissus? Can she really be in love with him?

*Narcissus*

* Do you feel sorry for Narcissus or does he deserve his fate?
* Was he too proud?
* Did his rejection of Echo cause his death?
* How do other people react to Narcissus? How would you feel if you knew people were only interested in you for your appearance? How would you react?

*Other questions to ask*

* Would Echo have loved Narcissus if he had not been so beautiful?
* Would Narcissus have fallen in love with his reflection if he had not been so attractive?
* Did Echo continue to love Narcissus? How do you know?
* What adjectives would you use to describe Narcissus? [*tragic, conceited, arrogant, vain*]
* Echo is transformed into a voice while Narcissus becomes a flower. Which do you think is the better fate? Why?
* If you were to undergo a transformation, what would you like to be?

**Further activities**

**Discussion 1**. Are good looks a blessing or a curse?

**Discussion 2.** In Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone there is a mirror, the mirror of Erised, which shows people what they most want in life and Dumbledore warns that many have withered away and died whilst staring into it. Do you think J.K. Rowling was influenced by the story of Narcissus? Is it wrong for an author to take ideas from other writers? Do you know other stories in which reflections reveal the truth? (e.g. *Lord of the Rings*)

**Debate**. ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’.

**Writing activity 1**. Write an obituary for Narcissus.

**Writing activity 2.** Create a face book page for Narcissus or Echo.

**Image**. Dali’s *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937). <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dali-metamorphosis-of-narcissus-t02343>.

What do you think of this painting? Is it beautiful? Mysterious? Frightening? Why do you think that Dali shows the narcissus flower coming out of an egg? How effective is Dali’s portrayal of Narcissus?